





## Shorter Article

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## Introduction

Textbooks have long been considered resources for empowering nationalism within historical, social and political contexts. In particular, nations which have experienced socio-political turmoil place emphasis on promoting learners' national identity through a national curriculum and designated textbooks (So, Kim & Lee, 2012). These textbooks serve as a pedagogical tool that plays a pivotal role in how learners should position themselves in the face of globalization (Matsuda, 2012; Matsuda & Friedrich, 2011). By the same token, they are artifacts that reflect realities alongside certain ideologies and values that society expects its citizens to learn while consolidating national identity through formal language education (Norton, 2013; Pavlenko, 2003; Pavlenko & Norton, 2007). Recent studies have also revealed that government-authorized English textbooks tend to be less hesitant about dealing with historical disputes regarded as contentious in nature (see Kim & Lee, 2023).

In this regard, Korea is not an exception as it has garnered attention due to its status quo of a divided nation. After its liberation from Imperial Japan's annexation in 1945, Korea had been engaged in a clash between communism and democracy, which resulted in an internecine war. The Korean War, which started in 1950 and was halted with an armistice in 1953, led the South and the North to negotiate a cease-fire, thereby leaving the two technically divided ever since. After around 70 years of division, South Korea now finds itself in a state of noncompliant ideological and military conflict amid a multicultural reality formed by a rapid change in demographics due to an influx of immigrants and an increasing number of North Korean defectors. In accordance with such changes, South Korea's national identity has evolved through struggles dealing with tensions between the past and the present.

Stemming from previous textbook analyses that detail the significance of learners' local (source) culture, this paper attempts to present a thought-provoking perspective to the construction of national identity, especially raising issues concerning the other half of Korea in South Korean middle school English textbooks. In this paper, the intention is not to provide a full-fledged analysis of the content documented in the textbooks, but rather to look into the background of the exclusion of the other Korea and examine its near absence in English textbooks. Lastly, it provides suggestions for future textbook research and development for inclusion of controversial material that can resonate with today's society.

## Korean identity: What is North Korea to South Koreans?

One of the most distinctive characteristics of what defines Koreanness (i.e., a state of being Korean) has been its 5000-year history of sharing a common bloodline – homogeneous ethnicity, language, and culture also known as *hanminjok*, literally meaning a monoethnic nation. This shared history and ancestry have laid the foundation for national unity and pride. Korea experienced numerous invasions from neighboring countries throughout its history, and in the process of defending the nation, its people have developed a strong sense of nationalism (So et al., 2012). Owing to such collective memories, Korea, despite being divided, has constantly attempted to preserve the heritage of 'one Korea', which has served as a powerful source of nationalism (Park, 2011; Shin, 2006; Yim, 2002). In this sense, national identity can be considered to be equivalent to ethnic identity as the other half of Korea is seen as an extension of Korean identity. This exclusive ethno-national identity has been the motivating force for pursuing peace and unification on the Korean peninsula (Ha & Jang, 2016; Lee et al., 2020).

This long-standing belief is now being challenged as people diverge from traditional viewpoints and new values emerge. South Korea is undergoing a drastic multiethnic

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demographic shift while simultaneously facing pervasive challenges related to uncertainty and anxiety over escalating border tensions, military confrontations, and provocations amid an impasse over nuclear talks. Precarious security issues as well as future relations have continuously made headlines nationally and globally. As such, inter-Korean relations entering new and different phases over the past half-century, not to mention ideological struggles, have had an impact on people's perceptions and attitudes toward the North (see Kim, 2020; Kim & Kim, 2019; Won & Huntington, 2021).

Younger generations barely find any relevance to the other Korea in their lives unlike earlier generations (Campbell, 2015, 2016). Such ambivalence has been well observed in recent studies that show young South Koreans' relatively negative attitudes toward the North and unification. Being less supportive of restoring a single nation due to institutional differences and discourses of distance is challenging the old myth of shared Koreanness (Ha & Jang, 2016; Lee, Choi & Min, 2019). This confirms that holding onto ethno-national ideology alone may no longer suffice and that emphasis on reunification is fading due to the prolonged division (Kim, 2015).

Despite these dissonances, efforts have been made to alleviate tensions. Besides holding a series of summit meetings and inter-Korean dialogues (Ministry of Unification, n.d.), there have been a wide range of practical policies such as hosting joint art and sports events, as well as promoting cultural exchanges between the two Koreas conducive to reconciliation and urging a peaceful resolution to the current situation in the peninsula (Yim, 2002; Ścibiorska-Kowalczyk & Cichoń, 2021). This, in turn, has sparked an interest in exploring how and to what extent these phenomena, which are embedded in the contemporary lives of Koreans, are reflected in government-authorized English textbooks (cf. Jang & Kim, 2021; Kang, 2020).

Research investigating recent history and social studies textbooks, in general, points out the inadequate description of the status quo with North Korea with little attention to its defectors, not to mention any detailed understanding of inter-Korean relations from an international perspective. (see Kang, 2021; Kim, 2020; Kim & Kim, 2019). Although the representation of the relationship between the two Koreas comprises a significant proportion in constructing Koreanness in contemporary society, whether to address the North in foreign language education still seems to be inconclusive.

### Constructing Koreanness without the other half in English textbooks

Despite the importance of bringing multiculturalism to the fore in English textbooks in response to globalization, many themes and contents are, in fact, inextricably linked to the construction of Korean identity. From viewing English as a means to transmit traditional values to engaging learners to reflect upon themselves in defining national identity in contemporary society, voicing Koreanness has been found to play a central role in the South Korean English education system (Kim & Lee, 2023; Song, 2013; Vinall & Shin, 2019).

It is clearly stated in the current English curriculum, stipulated by the Korean Ministry of Education (hereafter MOE) (2015), that materials related to 'peace, security, and unification, and heterogeneity of culture' are valid for developing learners' communication, inquiry, and problem-solving skills. Nevertheless, referring to North Korea in textbooks other than history or social studies, while not regulated, has been rare. Content pertaining to the North or the relationship between the two Koreas have been largely absent in English textbooks, falling short of portraying today's complex reality of a divided nation as can be seen in the following.

Omission of North Korea is noticeable starting with maps, portrayed in English textbooks, only representing the geographic territory of South Korea and not the entire Korean peninsula. Figure 1, extracted from an activity section from the *NE Neungyule* middle school English textbook for grade 3 learners (Kim et al., 2020: 24), clearly illustrates one case in point. The activity asks learners to think and write about the places that they wish to visit in Korea, only showing the southern part of the peninsula.

The 2015 Revised National Curriculum of Korea stipulates that 'unless there is a special reason not to, South Korea and North Korea should not be distinguished on maps' (MOE, 2015: 5). It further states that 'the territory of the Republic of Korea is the Korean peninsula' (MOE, 2015: 6). Despite the fact that textbook-writing guidelines dictate that the Korean peninsula be portrayed in its entirety and not just by the southern half in maps, English textbooks rarely present the entire peninsula as can be seen in Figure 1.

The following example shows a contrasting case where North Korean-related content is explicitly addressed. Figure 2 is an example taken from the *MiraeN* middle school English textbook for grade 2 learners (Choi et al., 2019: 124–125), which introduces a North Korean dish called 'fish skin sundae' – a North Korean stuffed fish dish which is unfamiliar in the South – and how it reminds the hypothetical author of their grandmother and her homeland in a writing exercise. As an extension of a lesson focusing on the backstories of some Korean foods, the activity asks learners to think about a special dish that is meaningful to their family.

The given example, while short, is loaded with presuppositions. While details have been backgrounded in the text, average Koreans are aware of this kind of family structure where a grandparent may have come from the North following the Korean War. The overall framing of the text may inadvertently direct learners' attention to the underlying ideologies related to collectiveness. The use of the first-person pronoun 'I' may infuse a sense of collective identity and memories of 'one Korea' that are being handed down through generations by food, offering a backdrop to reflect upon learners' Koreanness. It should be noted that this was the only volume among 21 government-authorized middle school English textbooks examined by the authors that explicitly mentioned North Korea, which shows that directly dealing with North Korea is not commonplace.

Considering the perspective of cultural content schema, this exercise shows the co-existence of homogeneity and



**Figure 1.** Absence of the North in a Korean map (Kim et al., 2020: 24)

heterogeneity as fish skin sundae sounds exotic to South Koreans. However, this may seem like an obsolete narrative due to a generation shift. The above can be interpreted from the textbook developers' generation as such, but whether this reinforces learners' awareness of North Korea is not clear. This, in fact, is a schema that may not be shared by learners who are in their teens. To make more sense, this grandmother should be either one of the following: a great-grandmother or a North Korean defector. Without further information, the inadequacy of describing the family relation fails to present today's reality, which may lack relevance to learners.

Content embedded in textbooks is by no means neutral as material related to Koreanness in English textbooks is a result of a series of decisions – what text to adopt, what images to use and where to place them, and what to leave in and out of the frame. However, it seems that North Korea requires even more careful planning as introducing unfamiliar, distant topics and values may engender dissonance. Content should be selected in a way to ensure that exposure to such themes reflect reality. The narrative included in this activity may seem to evoke nationalistic sentiment at first glance, but the context may seem unrealistic to learners. It is important to note that students learn better when they can connect to the content; therefore, identifying and including either explicit or implicit references that are relatable and meaningful to learners are important.

### Why should we even bother?

This may be a question for which curriculum designers and textbook developers alike have yet to provide any concrete

answers. The near absence of the other Korea aforementioned clearly shows the uncertainty over its inclusion in English textbooks. However, with current South Korean English textbooks being blatant in presenting even far more internationally controversial topics such as ongoing historical and territorial disputes, this may not be even perceived as sensitive in nature. Considering the reality learners face, excluding content related to the North would be analogous to removing a crucial part of the equation of Koreanness. It would be equivalent to ignoring today's inclusive, multicultural society.

Rather than directly addressing the North without sufficient and accurate information<sup>1</sup>, embracing content pertaining to the North within a multicultural framework could be an alternative. If directly mentioning the North is sensitive, covering the lived experiences of North Korean defectors could be a plausible resource. (e.g., Hough, 2022; Kim, 2016; Kim & Hocking, 2018; Park, 2020; Song & Denney, 2019; Yeung & Seo, 2022). Recent media reports and research may provide insights as to how the North could be incorporated within a multicultural framework. Moreover, with an array of government-funded institutions publishing annual reports on North Korean defectors, there is no reason why the other Korea should not be depicted in textbooks. Including such content may reflect new perspectives on the two Koreas amid tensions, promoting humane and pro-social attitudes and actions for a multicultural Korean society.

It is of vital importance to cultivate young generations to become active agents who can utilize English as a means to navigate and expand their boundaries of what constitutes multiculturalism and bring about positive change. In doing

Figure 2. Writing activity depicting a North Korean dish (Choi et al., 2019: 124–125)

so, this will contribute to elevating learners' consciousness in observing sustainable peace and co-prosperity on the peninsula and beyond as future members of the international community (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, n.d.). How learners perceive, experience, and act in the world is shaped by what they encounter through their daily lives and learn through formal education. The authenticity of a text should be taken into account as it can serve as a departure point for meaningful reflection. Relevance is another factor that facilitates learners to generate further thinking, resulting in interactive engagement with language and culture.

Considering the current climate, it would be contradictory to not include the other half of Korea. Content pertaining to the North should be included to present a holistic portrayal of Koreanness. Focusing solely on ethno-nationalism limited to traditional views is not conducive to today's multicultural society (Lim, 2020). Breaking away from stereotypes and taking a more global and practical approach to the coexistence of the two Koreas will better suit contemporary Korean society and beyond. Including the North as legitimate content in language teaching will eventually encourage students to better understand and critically reflect upon today's reality. This will lead to more successful language learning and use, and prepare them to become more competent Korean speakers of English.

### Where do we go from here? Identity reconfiguration for the future

Given Korea's unique situation – being a divided nation with fluctuating relations – an appropriate, timely response to

strategically adopting an international angle is imperative. As aforementioned, a true sense of Koreanness seems to be elusive without mentioning the other half of Korea. Instead of neglect and disaggregation, it is now time to move away from outdated stereotypes amid the diversifying population, build tolerance, and address flexibility, diversity, and inclusion as salient pieces in constructing Koreanness.

Alongside other subject textbooks, English textbooks in Korea are indisputably powerful vehicles for consolidating nationalism as it is about more than learning a foreign language. It is a path of exploration that is inextricably bound with society. Paving the way, by equipping learners with a foundation for mind-opening opportunities through English language use, will allow them to understand other viewpoints and expand the boundaries of their world. In other words, learning how to employ an additional language, English in this case, should conceivably be regarded as an act of meaning-making. This is due to the fact that 'English belongs to speakers of any culture who hope to share knowledge about their culture with others' (McKay, 2018: 18). Thus, constructing one's identity through language learning is a pivotal dimension of meaning-making.

Textbooks have the power to change ways of thinking. Equipping learners with repertoires related to positioning contemporary Koreanness in English could transform how South Koreans relate to the North and the world. This reconfiguration situates learners in a reflexive process with opportunities to envisage, construe, and make sense of who they are and how they should position themselves in the global era (Liddicoat & Scarino, 2013). In short, embracing inclusion through English education will bring benefits in terms of overcoming biases through mutual

respect, encouraging cohesion as well as equality, and fostering awareness of how South Koreans should present themselves internationally. Although it will still be long before the consolidation of these elements come to terms with the reality the two Koreas are situated in, perhaps over time a combination of such insights with pragmatism in cultivating Koreanness through language learning could segue into the English curriculum.

## Note

1 S. H. Kim (personal communication, April 4, 2022) noted that the difficulty in depicting North Korea was due to restrictive access to reliable information, which hinders material writers and limits the coverage of the North in textbooks.

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